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ABSTRACT

The occurrence of physical aggression in marriage is quite high. On the basis of frequency of occurrence among the general population, a distinction has been made between ordinary violence (frequent slapping, pushing) and severe violence (less frequent use of hitting with objects or use of lethal weapons). This study was conducted to examine how individuals evaluate ordinary and severe forms of physical aggression and how they evaluate female physical aggression and male physical aggression. Undergraduates (N=202) completed a demographic questionnaire and reported their experiences as aggressors and victims of physical aggression in past and current dating relationships using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), an inventory assessing the frequency of occurrence of various conflict resolution methods. Subjects were also presented the CTS with the husband as actor and the wife as recipient of aggression and with the wife as actor and the husband as recipient, and were asked to rate the actor's behavior. Both male and female subjects rated the husband's or wife's use of severe physical aggression more negatively than use of ordinary aggression. Both males and females rated female physical aggression less negatively than male physical aggression. In addition, evaluations of physical aggression were related to the occurrence of physical aggression in the dating relationships of the subjects. (NB)

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Evaluations of Physical Aggression in Marriage

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Running Head: Physical Aggression

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Evaluations of Physical Aggression in Marriage

The occurrence of physical aggression in marriage is quite high. Prevalence studies indicate that physical aggression occurs at some point during marriage in 20-30% of American married couples and repeated episodes of violence are reported by approximately 10% of married couples (cf. O'Leary & Arias, in press). On the basis of frequency of occurrence among the general population, a distinction has been made between "ordinary violence", i.e., frequently occurring forms of physical aggression such as slapping and pushing, and "severe violence", i.e., less frequently occurring and more physically harmful forms such as hitting with objects and the use of lethal weapons during arguments (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). However, the only empirical distinction found between these purportedly different types of marital physical aggression has been their frequency of occurrence. Both "types" of physical aggression have been found to be related to and predicted by similar sets of variables (Straus, 1983). Further, factor analytic studies (Barling, O'Leary, Jouriles, Vivian, & MacEwen, in press; Straus, 1979) indicate that both types of physical aggression load on the same factor. Hence, it is not clear that a distinction between types of physical aggression should be made simply because they occur at different rates. If the occurrence of "ordinary" and "severe" physical aggression are predicted by similar factors and by each other, individuals may not be making the distinction that researchers have been making. The failure to investigate the validity of an assumption, in this case assuming the existence of

distinct types of aggression, can seriously limit the understanding of the particular phenomenon.

An intriguing recent finding has been the higher prevalence of physical aggression among women than among men (Arias, Samios, & O'Leary, in press; O'Leary & Arias, in press). O'Leary and Arias (in press) speculated that this sex difference might be attributable to the evaluation of physical aggression as a function of sex or gender. That is, women's physical aggression might be evaluated less negatively than men's due to the decreased potential for physical harm in the case of the former. Less negative evaluations of female physical aggression could result in greater tolerance and, in turn, yield a higher rate of occurrence of female than male physical aggression. Again, distinct constructs, "female physical aggression" versus "male physical aggression", have been hypothesized to exist based on rates of occurrence.

In order to support a distinction made on the basis of frequency, variables differentially related to types of physical aggression, i.e., "ordinary" versus "severe" and female versus male, and possibly accounting for the difference in their frequency of occurrence should be specified. Subjective evaluations of "ordinary" and "severe" forms of physical aggression of a husband and a wife were examined as such a variable in this investigation. The main objectives of the current study were to examine whether individuals evaluate "ordinary" and "severe" forms of physical aggression similarly or differently and whether individuals evaluate female physical aggression and male physical aggression similarly or differently.

Additionally, the extent to which evaluations of physical aggression might be related to the individuals' own use of physical aggression in their relationships was examined.

Method

Subjects. One hundred and three male undergraduates and 99 female undergraduates volunteered their participation for this investigation. Subjects received research credit for participating but were not compensated in any other way. Confidentiality was assured and when run in groups, subjects were spaced to maximize privacy.

Instruments. Subjects completed a brief demographic questionnaire and were asked to report their experiences as aggressors and victims of physical aggression in both past and current steady dating relationships using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979). The CTS is an 18 item inventory assessing the frequency of occurrence of various conflict resolution methods. The last eight items of the CTS assess the occurrence of physically aggressive responses to conflict ranging from throwing an object at the partner to the use of lethal weapons against the partner.

The 18 items of the CTS were presented to subjects under two conditions: (1) the wife as the actor and husband as recipient, and (2) the husband as the actor. Subjects were instructed to rate the behavior of the husband/wife in the context of an argument using a semantic differential type questionnaire consisting of 12 bipolar, seven point evaluative scales (e.g., good --- bad, appropriate --- inappropriate, fair --- unfair,

etc.).

Results

Both male and female subjects rated the wife's use of "severe" physical aggression more negatively than her use of "ordinary" physical aggression (t (99) = 11.49, $p < .001$, for the men; t (95) = 9.74, $p < .001$, for the women). Likewise, subjects rated the husband's use of "severe" physical aggression more negatively than his use of "ordinary" physical aggression (t (98) = 6.93, $p < .001$, for the men; t (93) = 8.96, $p < .001$, for the women). Thus, individuals evaluated "ordinary" or frequently occurring forms of physical aggression less negatively than "severe" or more frequently occurring forms.

Men rated both "ordinary" and "severe" physical aggression more negatively when the husband was the perpetrator than when the wife was depicted as engaging in the violent behavior (t (98) = -10.75, $p < .001$, for "ordinary" aggression; t (99) = -5.42, $p < .001$, for "severe" aggression). Women, likewise, rated the husband's use of aggression more negatively than the wife's use (t (97) = -6.49, $p < .001$, for "ordinary" aggression; t (91) = -5.22, $p < .001$, for "severe" aggression). Thus, both men and women evaluated female physical aggression less negatively than male physical aggression.

Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted to examine the relationship between evaluations of physical aggression and the occurrence of aggression and victimization in the subjects own relationships. The four types of physical aggression (female ordinary, female severe, male ordinary, and male severe physical aggression) were used as the dependent

variables, and experience with physical aggression and gender were used as independent variables. For engaging in physical aggression, either in past relationships or the current exclusive relationship, there was a significant main effect for experience with aggression (Hotelling's T^2 = .15, F (4, 152) = 5.72, p < .001). Univariate tests suggested that subjects who had engaged in physical aggression against their dating partners rated male ordinary physical aggression (F (1, 155) = 14.70, p < .001), female ordinary aggression (F (1, 155) = 12.71, p < .001), and female severe aggression (F =(1, 155) = 13.34, p < .001) less negatively than individuals who had never engaged in or had been victims of physical aggression in a dating relationship. There was no significant difference between individuals who had engaged in physical aggression and those who had not on their ratings of male severe physical aggression.

The main effect of gender was not statistically significant. However, there was a significant experience by gender interaction effect (Hotelling's T^2 = .07, F (4, 152) = 2.64, p < .05). Univariate tests suggested that the significant interaction was mainly due to the tendency for men who had engaged in physical aggression to rate both ordinary and severe physical aggression on the part of the husband less negatively than women who had engaged in physical aggression (F (1, 155) = 3.08, p = .08, for male ordinary physical aggression; F (1, 155) = 3.68, p = .06, for male severe physical aggression), while men and women who had not experienced physical aggression rated male ordinary and severe physical aggression similarly.

For victimization, again there was a significant main effect for experience (Hotelling's T^2 = .07, F (4, 169) = 3.12, p < .05). Univariate tests indicated that subjects who had been victims of physical aggression in a past or current dating relationship rated male ordinary (F (1, 172) = 8.17, p < .01), female ordinary (F (1, 172) = 5.30, p < .05), and female severe physical aggression (F (1, 172) = 6.01, p < .05) less negatively than subjects who had never experienced physical aggression in their relationships. Again, differences between ratings of male severe aggression of subjects who had been victims and those who had not failed to reach statistical significance. Neither the main effect of gender nor the gender by experience interaction proved to be significant.

Discussion

The results of the current investigation suggest that men and women evaluate physical aggression similarly. Subjects made a subjective, evaluative distinction between "ordinary" and "severe" physical aggression. Physical aggression of any kind was perceived less negatively when the wife in the arguing couple was the aggressor. Further, evaluations of physical aggression were related to the occurrence of physical aggression in the dating relationships of the subjects. The difference between the frequency of "ordinary" and "severe" physical aggression and between male and female aggression may be the result, in part, of different attitudes toward each of these "types" of physical aggression. It is possible that the belief that certain forms of physical aggression are not as destructive as others increases the likelihood of occurrence of these "benign" forms of physical

aggression. It has been argued that less severe forms of physical aggression not be tolerated since a consequence of such might be escalation to more severe forms (Arias & O'Leary, in press). Additionally, research on the physical and psychological consequences of any form of physical aggression is lacking. Possibly the effects of "ordinary" and "severe" physical aggression, or of female and male physical aggression, are more similar than subjects' evaluations of these phenomena. If the effects of these different types of physical aggression are fairly equally negative, then it behooves us to attempt to change differential evaluations of these behaviors and possibly decrease their occurrence.

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